

On Tuesday, I met with the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Gary Roughead, to discuss the increased role that the Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren will play in our Nation's defense from missile attacks. Adm. Roughead assured me that the additional responsibilities will come with greater opportunities for employment and enhanced educational partnerships in and around Dahlgren, VA.

This decision comes on the heels of the President's announcement to eliminate the proposed European missile defense shield. Under the administration's proposed plan, Aegis ships with interceptors would become the first stage in the Nation's missile defense plan. Aegis, developed at Dahlgren, is a shipboard weapons system that uses the latest radar technology to detect and engage targets.

The Air and Missile Defense Command at Dahlgren currently serves as the Navy's lead center for addressing Naval, Joint, and Combined Air and Missile Defense. As the command expands through 2012 and beyond, its charter will include the entirety of Navy Integrated Air and Missile Defense. These are fantastic developments for both Dahlgren and its residents as we seek to put folks back to work and continue combating the developing threat of a missile attack.

Additionally, on Thursday I joined Congressmen Forbes, Nye, and Scott in sending a letter to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, where we cited our concern over recent reports suggesting that the Pentagon is contemplating a reduction in the nation's aircraft carrier fleet as part of the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review.

In the letter, we noted our support of Secretary Gates' recommended changes to future aircraft carrier construction schedules and his reiteration of the requirement for an 11 carrier force structure until at least 2040 as part of his presentation of the Fiscal Year 2010 DOD Budget Rollout.

However, in recent years, Congress has approved several requests by the Navy for legislative relief in the deactivation and retirement of aging aircraft carriers. These requests led Congress

to revise the original 12 carrier minimum and include the current 11 carrier minimum in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007.

However, I strongly believe that any further reductions below the current statutory minimum are not in our best national security interest. Our current carrier structure allows us the agility to maintain a worldwide presence and react efficiently to threats as they develop. Further reductions in carriers would hinder our reaction speed and place an increased burden on our sailors and marines around the globe.

*Congressman Rob Wittman represents the First District of Virginia. He was elected to his first full term in November 2008 and serves on the Natural Resources Committee and the Armed Services Committee where he is the Ranking Member of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.*